

The Army's Rapid Fielding Initiative Delivers

Soldiers Report Injuries Prevented, Lives Saved



Urban street fighting demands specialized equipment.

The war in Iraq is not your grandfather's war or your father's, and it isn't being fought in the same way. For the Army, that has presented myriad challenges, none greater than the urban, street fighting sniper fire, and ever-changing tactics that demand lightweight gear, new forms of protection and the ability to carry large supplies of ammunition. How the Army is meeting these technological and logistical challenges is a story of cooperation among government agencies and industry, a new government initiative with a dedicated mission and a flexible approach, and a home team's willingness to go to unusual lengths to get improved gear in the hands of the soldiers on the front lines.

This is how it happened. Everyone now agrees that specialized war fighting demands special equipment. But back in 2002, soldiers in Afghanistan were reporting instances of spending their own money to buy commercially available items they needed but had not received when they were deployed. Shortly thereafter, the Army directed Program Executive Office (PEO) Soldier to establish the Rapid Fielding Initiative (RFI), a program dedicated to saving soldiers' lives, enhancing their effectiveness in combat and improving their overall quality of life in the field by delivering technologically advanced equipment as quickly as possible.

Today RFI has equipped more than 500,000 active and reserve troops, and is the vanguard of the Army's transformation, ensuring modernization in a manner that underscores the Soldier-as-a-System philosophy. By the end of 2007, the entire Army as well as other services participating in certain joint missions will be equipped by RFI.

Getting Equipment in the Soldiers' Hands

COL Thomas Bryant, RFI Director, takes justifiable pride in the organization's success in meeting soldiers' equipment needs. "This program shows that the Army is responsive to and supportive of its most important component — the soldiers and the units in which they fight," said Bryant. "To field into soldier's hands 500,000 RFI kits at the average rate of 22,000 soldiers per month for 23 months, worldwide, is truly staggering."

As if fast-track producing and delivering new and improved gear were not enough, RFI also faced rapid and often last-minute or no-notice deployments. That sometimes meant there was not time to get the equipment to soldiers before they were deployed. Undaunted, RFI teams simply agreed to go to the battlefield as part of their mission. When necessary, RFI teams will visit soldiers at forward operating bases in Iraq or Afghanistan to get measurements for sizing. They then send the information to a staging facility in Kuwait, and RFI kits are delivered to the soldiers' units in about two weeks.

Bryant explains it this way. "The biggest challenges were ensuring that we had the supplies necessary to provide every soldier the right item in the right size the first time. Also, trying to synchronize the demands of the deploying unit, their training schedule, the item production schedules and the ability to deliver before the unit deploys was a huge challenge. Other significant challenges were the environments in which we fielded gear. The fixed facilities we set up in Balad and Baghdad came under fire

many times," he reported. "In addition, the dangers of sending our sizing teams around Afghanistan and Iraq, subjecting them to the dangers of the trip and then the dangers associated with the facilities themselves were taken in stride, but it was very challenging. We had at least three separate convoys with RFI personnel attacked in Iraq."

Flexibility has been key to RFI's success under such trying circumstances. "The fact that the program fielded RFI equipment to 90,000 soldiers in Iraq after building Baghdad and Balad fielding sites from scratch is an important accomplishment that further demonstrated RFI's ability to handle any contingency in stride—mission changes that would break the back of other acquisition programs," Bryant said.

Thanks to RFI, getting technologically advanced equipment from warehouse to foxhole is unquestionably faster; deliveries that once took months or years now take days or weeks. But fast fielding alone does not answer the challenge of protecting soldiers' lives. To respond to the need for specialized equipment that is effective in urban warfare, against sniper fire, and against an enemy whose tactics change continuously, the Army partnered with the Department of Defense research and development agencies, other services, and the Department of Energy's national laboratories, seeking answers to the challenges faced by soldiers in the field. The Army then looked beyond its usual contractors to companies that produce outdoor clothing, camping and hiking equipment to manufacturers of hunting gear, gun sights and electronic devices.

The results of this collaborative effort include RFI's Improved First Aid Kit, lightweight gear that is easier to carry and weaponry that is more lethal. RFI gear provides soldiers with the best protection while minimizing the weight of the equipment they must carry. This includes unusually large supplies of ammunition required for urban fighting where resupply is more difficult.

New Items in the RFI Kit

The current RFI kit contains about 58 items, including improved spotting scopes, weapons accessories, optics, lasers and Military Operations in Urban Terrain equipment, as well as improved basics like socks, boots and moisture wicking T-shirts. Some items in the kit are:

- Modular Lightweight Load-Carrying Equipment makes it possible for soldiers to adjust equipment loads to suit the mission. It consists of removable compartments and components and a fighting load vest with removable pockets. The modularity allows soldiers to tailor the load to meet mission needs.
- The Advanced Combat Helmet gives the soldier a better fit and allows for better hearing. It is lighter than the traditional Kevlar helmet and makes it easier for the soldier to shoot while wearing it.
- Laser Target Location Systems provide daylight and limited night capability to observe and accurately locate targets for voice transmission of target data.
- Miniature binoculars provide soldiers a small, lightweight means of supporting reconnaissance and target identification.

- The Improved Spotting Scope with Tripod allows identification of targets from greater distances.

When it comes to evaluating the RFI gear, Bryant said the soldiers' experience tells the story best. "The 1st Cavalry Division, during Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF), ensured that their soldiers wore eye protection every time each soldier left the Forward Operating Bases. The results were that 33 soldiers saved their eyesight due to the ballistic spectacles provided by RFI. There have been a number of stories relayed to us that the Advanced Combat Helmet saved the lives of soldiers who would have otherwise died from vehicle crashes and rollovers, but did not because of the head protection it provided."

The Army is well on the way to achieving its goal of equipping all 864,000 soldiers of the operating Army with RFI equipment by the end of fiscal year 2007. Forty-six active and 34 reserve component brigade combat teams (BCTs), along with their associated support units, will be equipped. To deliver the equipment

to the soldiers who need it, the PEO Soldier RFI Operations Team has traveled all over the United States and to Germany, Italy, Kuwait, Qatar, Afghanistan, Iraq, Kosovo, Korea, Sinai and Pakistan.

So far, RFI is a success story. Army leadership listened to soldiers, identified a clear need, and set about accomplishing it with the cooperation of federal agencies, Congress and private

industry. Within the Army itself, various offices supplied the resources necessary to procure state-of-the-art equipment quickly. At this point, continued Congressional support is critical so that the same level of RFI support to our soldiers can continue.

Small Home Team Supports Worldwide Initiative

RFI operates under the PEO Soldier program at Fort Belvoir, Va. Bryant credits PEO Soldier with RFI's ability to carry out its mission. "For the PEO Soldier employees that make this happen every day, it is a true demonstration of a total Army effort and commitment from the Army's soldiers, civilians and contractors to those soldiers on the streets and in the deserts of Iraq and Afghanistan. PEO Soldier has been amazingly agile, flexible and responsive to one of the largest fielding efforts since World War II."

Since November 2002, the RFI team has been providing soldiers with the best state-of-the-art individual and small unit equipment available. "The RFI program exceeded all my expectations," Bryant said. "The program is consistently able to figure out ways to field soldiers who need RFI equipment as they deploy, whether it is in CONUS, Korea, Germany, Kosovo, Sinai, Qatar, Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan or anywhere soldiers are deployed."

Additional information on RFI can be found at
<http://peosoldier.army.mil/>

